

## **Tours given by candlelight**

### **Story of Levi Coffin House, underground railroad spread**

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**by Bill Engle (Staff Writer)**

FOUNTAIN CITY, Ind. -- Kris Bitner has driven by the U.S. 27 North exit on Interstate 70 a hundred times without ever taking it.

The second grade teacher from Blue River knew that only a few miles up the road she would find one of the most inspiring historic sites in the nation's history.

Friday she made the trip to the Levi Coffin House to see the place she had always wanted to visit.

"It's a story I've always been fascinated with," she said during Friday's candlelight Coffin House tour that kicked off a 15-county collaboration called the Southeast Indiana Trails to Freedom.

Bitner visited the Coffin House with her husband, John, who teaches adult education in New Castle and friend Sue Kovacs who teaches at the Henry County Youth Center in New Castle.

"It's a story of the courage of ordinary people, on both sides; these people who helped the slaves and the slaves themselves," Kris Bitner said.

"I'm a history major and coming here makes it all come alive," John Bitner said. "It's an amazing place."

The candlelight tour followed a reception and viewing of a quilt and art show at Indiana University East.

The Coffin House tour started well before sunset but attracted a steady stream of visitors, both young and old.

Kate Eliason of Centerville toured the historic home with her parents, Doug and Jeanie Eliason. It was not her first visit.

"I've been here on field trips and I always enjoy it," said the 18-year-old. "I think it's so incredible to see where they hid the slaves. I like history and I guess I can go to the movies any day."

People walked through the home listening to stories of how Levi Coffin equipped the house with compartments to hide runaway slaves and how his wife, Catharine, invited the town's women into her home to make clothes for the slaves.

They were women who wanted to help but were afraid to break federal laws against harboring, aiding and abetting runaway slaves.

"The story of the Underground Railroad is becoming such a hot topic," said Sandra Jackson, Coffin House site manager.

Jackson Friday was celebrating the collaboration kickoff and the fact that the Levi Coffin House was recently named as one of the 25 top historic sites in the United States by The History Channel.

"It's thrilling," she said. "Next year is our 40th year and we're quite proud of the fact that we've done all this with volunteers. We've never had a paid staff."

But Jackson said the home needs an interpretive center. That's why her group has bought the building next door. She said driving tours of the state's Underground Railroad stops and further research into the entire story will be part of the Trails to Freedom project.

"We think we've done a pretty good job of telling the story of Levi and Catharine and we want to tell the rest of the story," she said.